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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study analyzed the kind of questions that second graders posed for discussion when the only directive was to ask anything that seemed important or interesting. Subjects, students in a second-grade classroom in Athens, Georgia, represented a cross section of their community. They were approximately equally divided in regard to race, class, and sex. Data consisted of 54 questions and 264 responses across three storybooks. The three-way relationship among question, text, and reader was examined, and the questions were analyzed from the researchers' perspectives as former elementary teachers and current reading teacher educators. Results indicated that: (1) second graders were primarily interested in posing and discussing "author and you" questions (combining information from the book with things they knew that go beyond the book); (2) students did not rely solely in words from the text in formulating their discussion questions of their responses; (3) they did not pose questions and offer answers that were entirely unrelated to the text; (4) variations in questions were best represented by placing different responses to the same question along a continuum representing degrees of text-relatedness versus reader-relatedness; and (5) some of the questions were similar to questions a teacher would ask while others reflected a child's view. (Contains 21 references and a figure illustrating the continuum of question-answer relationships.) (RS)

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Second Grade Children's Storybook Questions and Discussion: A Qualitative Analysis

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> There have been a number of studies of the questions which teachers ask or should ask, but few, if any, of the questions which the children themselves are asking. We know that if children are active mentally, they will be asking questions, for curiosity is one of the strongest elements in the child's life, and the ability to keep alive this spirit of inquiry is one of the strongest tests of the teacher's success. (Thompson, 1924, p. 347).

This 1924 assessment of the importance of student questioning and the paucity of research is a recurring theme in the educational literature. In 1942, Fahey reported that "[d]espite frequent assertions of the value of pupil questioning in the learning process and the comparative abundance of studies dealing with young children, the number of scientific reports involving questioning in the classroom is very small" (p. 345). More recently, in a review of the questioning literature, Carlsen (1991) acknowledged that student questioning in the classroom and studies of student questions are rare in comparison to studies of the effect of teacher questioning on student learning. The research on student questioning and reading has focussed on: (a) comprehension questions that seek information from others (teacher or classmates); and (b) self-monitoring questions used to check on one's comprehension and understanding (Bean, 1985). Primarily the emphasis has been on training or instructing students to ask the kind of questions that lead to improved scores on measures of reading comprehension (e.g., Palincsar and Brown, 1984). This emphasis does not reflect a child-centered approach to questioning because it undervalues "questions which may arise in the mind of a boy or girl in conversing with others or in reading books" (Dewey, 1944, p. 155).

The lack of research on children's questions is curious given the recurrence of student-centered approaches to teaching throughout the history of U. S. education (Cuban, 1984). Given that the field of reading (or more broadly, literacy) has been experiencing a renewed and growing interest in student-centered learning, it is timely to consider research on student questioning. Recently, in an interview on literacy as inquiry, Jerome Harste, suggested that we view reading as

inquiry, writing as inquiry and that inquiry become the philosophical basis for what we do as teachers and students (Monson & Monson, 1994). One way to approach reading as inquiry is to let students pose questions for discussion following a shared reading experience (Commeyras & Sumner, 1994a).

This paper reports a qualitative analysis of the questions that second grade students posed and discussed during three storybook sessions. The goal of the analysis has been to describe the kind of questions that second graders posed for discussion when the only directive was to ask anything that seemed important or interesting. The data used comes from a larger study on the process of transferring responsibility from teacher to student in literature-based discussions designed to promote critical thinking (Commeyras, 1994b).

Context

Students

The study took place in Georgiana Sumner's second grade classroom in Athens, Georgia. The students represented a cross-section of their community. They were approximately equally divided in regard to race (African- & European-American), class (public housing & private homes) and sex. There was a continuum of readers from those who were minimally-fluent and infrequent readers to those who were exceptionally fluent and frequently chose to read.

Overview of Study

The study that generated the data analyzed and reported in this paper was an exploratory school-based research project undertaken by Commeyras, a university-based researcher, and Sumner a second grade teacher-researcher. There were three phases of exploration that occurred over the course of 1992/93. In phase I, student participation in whole group dialogical-thinking reading lessons was studied. In these lessons students identified and discussed two sides of an issue related to a story that was read to them. (Commeyras, 1993). In phase II, students generated their own discussion questions during whole group storybook sessions. They were directed to ask questions where there might be more than one answer. Their discussion of these

question was facilitated by an adult. In phase III, students listened to a story and then went to their desks to write all questions they had about the story. They discussed many of these questions in small peer group discussions followed by a whole class discussion. Following each phase of exploration individual and group interviews were conducted to elicit student perspectives on the different approaches to literature-based discussions.

Data Sources

We analyzed data from three of the eight discussion sessions that occurred in phase III, focussing on student-generated questions as discussed in groups or in follow-up whole class discussion. The books used were The Wednesday Surprise (Bunting & Carrick, 1989), The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980) and Horrible Harry's Secret (Kline & Remkiewicz, 1990). The data was derived from the transcripts by extracting those student comments that represented different responses to a question. For example, during discussion of The Paper Bag Princess some of the responses to "Why did the dragon carry Ronald away?" were as follows.

1) To eat him for his lunch.

2) I think the dragon wanted to burn the castle down cause he wanted to get both but he got the boy, the Prince Ronald.

3) He did not want to take both of them....He really wanted to take the princess but when he burned up the castle and it fell down he got the wrong one.

4) He was going to eat him because -- pass me the book. He had this little bib on him.

5) He wanted to take the prince cause he's had a lot princesses and he's tired of eating princesses and he wants to eat a prince.

Fifty-four questions and 264 responses across the three stories became the focus of our analysis in two different ways. First, we examined the three-way relationship among question, text, and reader (Pearson & Johnson, 1978) using Raphael's (1986) four types of question answer

relationships. Second, we examined the questions from our perspective as former elementary school teachers and presently as reading teacher educators.

Question Answer Relationships

Analysis

We used Raphael's (1986) Question Answer Relationships (QAR) as an interpretive lens to analyze the kind of questions students were posing for discussion. QAR was not used simply to assign questions to categories rather it provided a means for examining the relationship between the student questions and their responses to those questions. QAR is viewed as a viable way of classifying questions because it acknowledges that questions need to be considered in relation to both the text being read and the reader's background knowledge (Pearson & Johnson, 1978; Raphael & Pearson, 1985). In many contemporary textbooks on the teaching of reading, QAR is included under the topic of questioning (e.g., Mason & Au, 1990). The omnipresence of QAR in the literature make it a logical consideration in investigating the kind of questions students ask about text.

QAR is used to teach students that there are two primary sources of information for answering questions: "In the Book" or "In My Head." When answers come from within the book they are either "right there" in a single sentence or they require readers to "think and search" across sentences and/or paragraphs. When answers to questions come from the reader's head they are either "Author and You" or "On My Own." "Author and You" answers combine information from the book with things we know that go beyond the book. Questions that are answered without reference to the book are "On My Own" because the information is coming solely from the reader's background knowledge.

Our approach to using QAR to analyze questions and transcripts involved a series of steps. First, we independently read the storybook and questions that students posed for discussion to consider whether their questions could be categorized as "Right There," "Think & Search," "Author & You," or "On Your Own." Second, we met to discuss our attempts to classify the student-

questions. In these meetings we explored the reasons why some questions were difficult to assign to a category. Third, we independently considered the applicability of QAR categories for the list of questions and student answers gleaned from transcripts of small group and whole class discussions for a story. Fourth, we met to discuss the kind of responses students gave to questions. In this meeting we paid particular attention to difficulties that arose in assigning QAR categories to some student responses. These four steps were used for the data from each of the three story sessions selected for analysis. As we progressed through the data we recorded patterns, anomalies and insights that contributed to our thinking about the kind of questions students were posing for discussion.

Author and You

According to Raphael (1986) the "author and you" question answer relationship occurs when the answer is not in the story but must be constructed using "what you already know, what the author tells you in the text, and how it fits together" (p. 519). In our two approaches to examining the 54 questions generated by second graders we found that they were predominantly "author and you" questions. When we classified the questions without looking at student responses[1] we found 82% to be "author and you." When we compared our judgements to the question answer relationships represented by the 264 "answers" offered by students we found a high rate of agreement (94%). In other words, the students responded to most of their questions by combining information from the text with what they knew about worldly matters.

In those few instances where our classification of questions differed from the way children responded (6%) it was because there were some "answers" that were more reader-related than we anticipated. For example, while discussing Horrible Harry's Secret (Kline & Remkiewicz, 1990), students responded to the question: "Why was Harry in Love?" with the following ideas:

1) Because Harry liked frogs and Song Lee brought a frog.

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[1] The inter-rater agreement for classifying questions was 90%.

2) Harry liked Song Lee because she got yucky things that he liked to play with.

3) Boys can like girls because they can do boy things.

4) Harry liked Song Lee because she was cute.

5) Boys can like girls for other reasons not just because they are cute.

The first three comments are "author and you" type "answers" whereas the last two comments are not related to the story. Answers such as these can be offered without reading the story. In Raphael's (1986) scheme they would classified as "on my own" because the children relied solely on their background knowledge of what makes girls attractive to boys. The second graders' responses to questions rarely reflected "right there," "think and search," or "on my own" question answer relationships. They were most interested in talking about aspects of the three stories in light of their own world knowledge.

From Categories to Continuum

The lack of "right there" or "think and search" questions was due, in part, to Raphael's (1986) stipulation that the words for the question and answer can be found in the text. These second grade students did not rely only on words from the text when posing and answering questions. On the other hand, they exhibited a great deal of variability in the "author and you" questions and answers. Some were very text-related (i.e., "right there" or "think and search") while others were mostly reader-related (i.e., "on my own"). This led us to reconceptualize QAR as a continuum rather than as four discrete categories. The QAR labels "right there," "think and search," "author and you," and "on my own" become touchstones along this continuum that ranges from text-related to reader-related.

To illustrate QAR as a continuum we have drawn examples from the data on The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980). It is a fairy tale about Princess Elizabeth who goes to great lengths to save her betrothed Prince Ronald from a dragon. When she succeeds the prince admonishes her for smelling like ashes, having tangled hair, and wearing a paper bag. She retorts

that, despite his neat appearance, he is nothing but a bum and she runs off into the sunset without him.

One student-generated question was, "Why was Ronald so mean to Elizabeth when he saw her in the paper bag?" The idea that Ronald was mean to Elizabeth is implied rather than stated in the story. For this reason the question stem belongs close to the "author and you" touchstone (see Figure 1). In examining the relationship between the question and five student responses we found notable variations. To illustrate this we have ordered and annotated the following student "answers" to show a progression from those that were more text-related to those that were more reader-related (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

#1 "Because she was wearing this little stupid paper bag."

This "answer" can be traced to what Ronald says when he is rescued from the dragon's cave.

> Elizabeth, you are a mess! You smell like ashes, your hair is all tangled and you are wearing a dirty old paper bag. Come back when you are dressed like a real princess. (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980, unpaginaged)

This student relied primarily on words from the text to answer the question.

#2 "Because he didn't like the way she was dressed.

This response represents a more general interpretation of Ronald's comments to Elizabeth. It sums up Ronald's attitude toward Elizabeth without going beyond the text.

#3 "I think he was....mean because he's used to seeing her in her princess clothes and not in just plain old paper bags. And she's usually with her hair all done and I think she's a little bit fancier and her hair wasn't all tattered and all that. So he probably just didn't see her in the way she really was."

This student has combined information from an illustration of Elizabeth in a full-length gown with coiffured hair with Ronald's comments when she rescued him. The student abstracts from

these textual sources of information the idea that Ronald was unable to see the real Elizabeth because he was attending to her disheveled appearance.

#4 "He probably think she look like a boy because how that hair sticking up like a Afro like a boy. And he might not want to marry her."

This answer is more reader-related than the previous ones because the student draws upon his background knowledge of heterosexuality, hairstyles and gender differences to explain Ronald's attitude toward Elizabeth. The answer provides an explanation for why Ronald was disturbed by the way the Princess' hair looked after outwitting the dragon.

#5 "If someone is not gonna get married they're gonna get mad at each other."

We place this answer at the far right end of the QAR continuum near the touchstone "on my own." This response to why Ronald was mean to Elizabeth is beyond the text. The student has drawn on her understanding of how people feel about each other when they break off a marriage engagement. It is conceivable that this student could have offered this explanation about the relationship between getting mad and getting married without reading The Paper Bag Princess.

Perspectivity

Analysis

Perspectivity (Ellen Messer-Davidow (1985) and standpoint theory (Harding, 1991) are emphasized over objectivity in feminist epistemology. Perspectivity and stance refer to the relation of the inquirer or knower to whatever is being studied. Such an approach to inquiry rejects the idea that the researcher can assume a detached and unsituated perspective. Perspectivity restructures inquiry by using and valuing different viewpoints or standpoints. In our study we thought it would be informative to make explicit our perspectives and use them to analyze the children's literature discussion questions. We decided to use our shared perspectives as former elementary school teachers, reading teacher educators, and researchers in elementary classrooms to examine the student-generated questions. Specifically, we asked ourselves whether the 54 student-generated questions were like the questions we would pose for discussion with students to

promote educational goals such as reading comprehension, literary understanding and critical thinking. We did not assume that our shared teacher perspectives would yield identical views, but we were interested in discovering where our perspectives would converged. Separately we considered the list of student-generated questions and identified those questions that were similar to questions we would pose as teachers versus those that seemed to reflect a uniquely child-centered view of the stories and life. Then we met to compare our judgments and discuss how they reflected about our perspectives.

Teacher-Type versus Child-Type Questions

Students posed questions for each story that we could envision bringing up for discussion.. We found slightly more than one third of the questions (20 out of 54) to be "teacher-type" questions. For example, we both judged the following questions about The Wednesday Surprise (Bunting & Carrick, 1989) to be of this type.

1) Why couldn't the grandmother read?

2) Why did Anna teach grandma how to read?

3) How did Grandma learn to read?

4) How did Anna know how to read but her grandmother didn't?

We also both agreed that about half of the questions (26 of 54) reflected interests and concerns about the stories that would not occur to us as teachers to bring up for discussion. We are calling these uniquely "child-type" questions. A few examples from The Wednesday Surprise are:

1) What kind of truck did the dad have?

2) What is the Velveteen Rabbit?

3) Why did grandpa not go to the party?

4) How old is the grandmother?

Each of these questions would not occur to us to bring up for discussion for different reasons. The first question is about a minor detail that is not provided in the text. The answer to the second

question seems obvious given the text: "Grandma reads and acts out *The Easter Pig*. And *The Velveteen Rabbit*" (Bunting & Carrick, 1989, p. 29). The third question asks about Grandpa who is not mentioned in the story. The fourth question seeks information about Grandma's age which seems unimportant and impossible to determine. In pointing out that these questions would not occur to us does not mean that we find them less important or valuable. Commeyras (1994c) has argued elsewhere that all student-generated questions are worthy of discussion even if they seem nonsensical or trivial to us as teachers.

Summary

In this study we learned that second graders were primarily interested in posing and discussing "author and you" questions. These students did not rely solely on words from the text in formulating their discussion questions or their responses. Also they did not pose questions and offer answers that were entirely unrelated to the text. We did find a significant degree of variability within their "author and you" questions and responses. These variations were best represented by placing different responses to the same question along a continuum representing degrees of text-relatedness versus reader-relatedness. When we examined the student-generated questions from our teacher perspectives we found that some were like questions we would ask while others reflected a child's view.

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Question: Why was Ronald so mean to Elizabeth when he saw her in the paper bag?

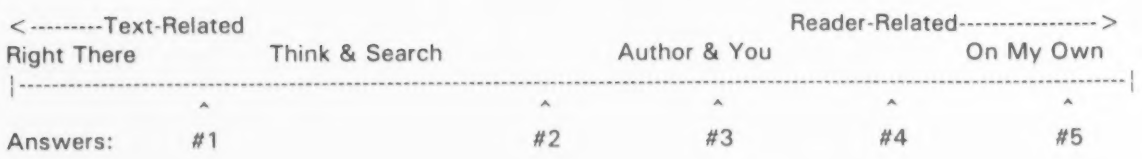

Figure 1. A Continuum of Question Answer Relationships.